

Changes and Mechanisms of Social Interaction Models in the Digital Age

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Abstract: In the wave of the digital age, technology is rapidly evolving from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and moving towards the new era of the metaverse. Social media, as a pioneer of this transformation, has deeply permeated people's daily lives, reshaping our social interaction models. The rise of "companion socialization" is a typical phenomenon in this transformation, reflecting significant changes in social interaction models in the digital age. This paper aims to systematically review the notable changes in social speed, social subjects, and social methods during the evolution of social media, and to deeply analyze the reasons behind these changes. By exploring the mechanisms of market evolution, platform manipulation, and user addiction, this study seeks to help people better understand the pros and cons of social media, adopt a more rational attitude towards the social challenges of the digital age, and promote the construction of a healthy social ecosystem.

Keywords: Digital Age, Social Media, Social Interaction Models, Platform, Media Evolution

1. Introduction

The term "社交媒体" is a translation of "Social Media," though different scholars hold varying viewpoints, translating it as "社会化媒体" or "社会性媒体". Among these, "社交媒体" is more widely accepted. With the deepening of social media research, its definition has become narrower. Social media refers to a series of web applications built on the technologies and ideologies of Web 2.0 that allow users to create and exchange User-Generated Content (UGC)[1]. In the context of the digital age, everyone faces an uncertain risk society, and this uncertainty permeates our daily lives through technological media. The changes in social media are imperceptibly altering us. With the combination of technological updates and innovative ideas, the development of social media has become increasingly intense. During its continuous evolution, it has brought about changes in social interaction models. Through literature review and observation, this paper sorts out the specific manifestations of changes in social interaction models. By focusing on the three main subjects of the market, platforms, and users, and exploring how these three interact with social media to trigger changes in social interaction models, this study aims to contribute to the construction of a healthy social ecosystem in the digital age.

2. Changes in Social Interaction Models

2.1. Social Speed: From Pen Pal Socialization to Fast-food Socialization

During the heyday of BBS (Bulletin Board System), online interactions on platforms like Tianya, Mop, and blogs were mostly conducted in written form. Personal interests, novel viewpoints, and daily experiences served as the material for users' posts. The poster would assume the role of "thread starter" or "楼主" (Lou zhu). Other users, upon seeing different threads posted by various thread starters, would comment based on different motivations, whether to find like-minded individuals or to express their unique opinions. The thread starter's act of replying to comments imbued the interaction with social attributes. Due to the underdeveloped infrastructure at that time, and the low information transmission rate of 2G mobile communication technology, the thread starter would see comments later than when they were actually posted. Tianya Forum limited posts to 10,000 Chinese characters, while Mop Forum had no character limit. Most posts were relatively long and required readers' patience. This reading time also resulted in delayed comments. This reading "buffer period" or "cooling-off period" often led users to think more carefully before responding. Additionally, as of July 2001, the average weekly online time for users was 8.7 hours, with the majority going online at 8 or 9 PM, reaching a ratio of 77.2%[2]. This meant that the time from commenting to replying was quite long. People's life pace was slow, and their focus remained on real-life matters. Their attitude towards socializing with strangers online was casual but not frivolous. This mindset was similar to the approach people had with pen pal correspondence, where the slow internet speed and delayed responses resembled the lengthy process of mailing letters. Thus, this period of social interaction is aptly termed "pen pal socialization."

However, with the update and iteration of social media, the advent of Web 2.0 features embodied in Facebook, Twitter, MicroBlog, WeChat, and other platforms, has shifted the pen pal socialization model towards a fast-food socialization trend. Short video socialization and "companion socialization" are manifestations of this trend. By December 2023, the average weekly online time had more than tripled from 2001, reaching 26.1 hours[3]. Internet usage is no longer highly concentrated in the evening hours of 8 or 9 PM; daytime online activity has gradually increased and is more evenly distributed[4]. Users are frequently active on the internet. In the backdrop of the rapid emergence of social media, many people, driven by a sense of novelty, navigate through various social media platforms. On average, global social media users are active on six different social media platforms each month[5].

On one hand, with technological support, internet speed has greatly improved. By 2019, the information transmission rate reached 10 Gbps, validating the instantaneous nature of the internet. Instant messaging, immediate comments on MicroBlog, and instant likes on WeChat Moments all highlight the accelerated speed of social interactions. On the other hand, being involved in multiple social media platforms means that the time spent on each one is relatively reduced. This compression of time inadvertently accelerates social interactions, increasing the quantity of interactions while simultaneously reducing their quality. Users are immersed in the "time machine" created by the internet, enjoying the convenience brought by technology, often unaware that they are deeply entrenched in the "fast-food trap" of time controlled by capital. After indulging in fast-food socialization for a while, it loses its charm, becoming monotonous and uniform. With the aid of artificial intelligence and algorithms, "pre-made" social interactions emerge. Instead of humans, the interactions are conducted by robots that have undergone deep learning through big data, such as ChatGPT, a powerful AI capable of understanding the context and providing the desired answers. At this point, social interactions may lose their interactive essence, turning into a performance of individual psychological activities.

The essence of fast-food socialization is actually the emptiness of desire, the lack of companionship, and increased pressure. To some extent, this is a byproduct of technological advancement and urban evolution. How to maintain the sincerity of pen pal socialization in the face of rapid technological progress is a critical issue that requires deep reflection in the current era of fast-food socialization.

2.2. Social Subjects: From Elite Socialization to Mass Socialization

Reviewing the development of social media, the leading figures of Tianya, Mop, and BBS sites were characterized by "elite" qualities. Their sensitivity to the internet was closely related to their cultural backgrounds. Tianya's founder, Xing Ming, with his academic background from Sun Yat-sen University and work experience in government information departments, imbued Tianya with a scholarly atmosphere. As shown in Table 1, data on users' occupations, educational levels, and gender also confirm that in the early days of the internet, those who had access to computers and the internet were mostly from the "elite class" of the time, either engaged in related technical work or having a high level of education.

Table 1: Basic Information of Netizens

Year	Occupation (Top 3)	Education Level (Top 3)	Male	Female
2001	Students 23.0%	Bachelor's Degree 33.6%	61.3%	38.7%
	Professional Technicians 20.6%	High School 28.8%		
	Clerks and Related Personnel 18.6%	Associate Degree 26.7%		
2004	Students 31.9%	High School 30.6%	59.3%	40.7%
	Professional Technicians 13.2%	Bachelor's Degree 28.2%		
	Managers in Enterprises and Institutions 9.6%	Associate Degree 26.0%		
2023	-	-	51.4%	48.6%

Overall, in the Web 1.0 era, those who had access to the internet were mostly well-educated males. The dominant position of males in the gender order provided them with material rewards, which have been significantly underestimated[6]. They enjoyed the benefits of the internet earlier than females, which is just a part of the "patriarchal dividend." Naturally, the users on social media at that time were homogeneous, and the high threshold for internet access fostered elite socialization. Platforms like Renren and Facebook initially restricted their usage to college students only. Elite socialization ensured the balance of social interaction quality. For instance, Tianya and Mop were initially user-managed platforms until the expansion of the user base disrupted this balance due to the varying quality of users. Lower-educated groups, such as farmers and workers, were busy with their jobs. Only with technological advancements that improved efficiency did they have the time and mental capacity to engage with the internet. The greatest benefit of internet technology is undoubtedly the reduction in the cost of going online. Inclusivity became the key reason for the expansion of the range of social subjects, driving the transition from elite socialization to mass socialization. Compared to the algorithm-driven mass socialization of later stages, early elite socialization allowed for more autonomy in choosing social subjects.

In their quest to acquire more users, social media platforms removed usage barriers. Facebook is the best example, opening its registration to the public in 2006. Social media users became heterogeneous, impacting content quality, with undesirable content such as pornography, violence, and fraud becoming rampant. The ultimate goal of the mass audience using social media is to build relationships through the expression of opinions rather than to communicate using viewpoints. [7] Nowadays, people use social media as a tool to supplement daily interactions. According to the "Post-95s Social Attitudes and Social Relationships Survey Report," over 80% of the surveyed users view social software as an important means to expand their network [8]. Earlier "elite socialization" did not treat social media as an extension of real-life interactions but as a venue for expressing opinions, with socialization being secondary. The popularity of works like "Ming Dynasty Those Things" and "Ghost Blows Out the Light" on Tianya Forum was not due to social relationship marketing but rather an unexpected success.

The transition from elite socialization to mass socialization has promoted the rise of female socialization. Many social media platforms have positioned their user base towards females. Pinterest's design concept extends the habit of women clipping photos from magazines to online collections, making it highly popular among female users. According to 2014 research data from RJMetics, only 20% of Pinterest's registered users were male, and only 8% of them actively shared content. [9] Women are more emotional and sensitive to visual socialization. Consequently, many photo-based social media platforms incorporate beautification features like filters to attract female users. Moreover, women, due to their physiological and psychological traits, have an advantage in social interactions. Women's purchasing power and willingness have led to a female-leaning trend in social media, with female live streamers significantly outnumbering male live streamers. Many social media platforms produce content around fashion and beauty to attract female users.

2.3. Social Methods: From Singular to Diversified Socialization

In recent years, related surveys have shown that social media fatigue affects users' willingness to migrate between social media platforms [10]. Social media, under the pressure of user fatigue, continues to innovate, evolving from singular to diversified social methods. This development trend began to sprout in the Web 2.0 era, with social media types divided into microblogging (e.g., MicroBlog), photo-sharing (e.g., Instagram), video-sharing (e.g., YouTube), instant messaging (e.g., WeChat), anonymous social networking (e.g., Soul), short video sharing (e.g., TikTok), and interest-based social networking (e.g., Douban). The root of this diversification is the emergence of mobile social media. On January 9, 2007, the release of the first-generation iPhone in the United States initiated the mobile internet wave. The mobile internet is the product of the convergence of mobile wireless communication and the internet, with mobile communication operators providing access and internet companies offering various applications, inheriting the characteristics of mobile communication (anytime, anywhere, and personal) and the internet (openness, sharing, and interactivity). [11] Users are no longer limited to text expression; images and videos have become more direct forms of communication. At the same time, the traceability of the internet has made image and video socialization a source of pressure for users. This is the appeal of Snapchat, whose "self-destructing messages" reduce the stress and anxiety associated with the permanent recording of content [12]. With advances in VR and brain-computer interface technology, virtual simulation socialization will break the boundaries between virtual and real, making online socialization an extension of offline reality, as seen in platforms like "Second Life" and the "Metaverse."

Changes in users' emotional needs have also stimulated innovation in social methods. In 2023, the term "companion socialization" trended on MicroBlog. According to the "2023 Companion Socialization Report," more than half of young people have companions, and 31% of those without companions still want one [13]. Netizens post their needs for finding companions on various social

media platforms, and Little Red Book (Little Red Book) has specifically created an entry point for "companion socialization."

The diversification of social methods keeps users online 24/7, blurring the lines between offline and online, and overlapping public and private spaces. Social media is becoming a comprehensive medium, continually expanding its functions to consolidate and expand social relationships. WeChat, as an instant messaging product, is used by many enterprises for work communication due to its convenience and simplicity. It also covers daily scenarios such as transportation, lifestyle services, and shopping. Tasks like booking a taxi after work or buying tickets for a trip can all be done on WeChat. However, this convenience comes at the cost of invading private domains, trapping employees in a state of being "physically at home but mentally at work," with the expectation of timely responses on WeChat becoming necessary to maintain relationships with leaders and colleagues.

3. Market, Platform, Users: Mechanisms of Three Major Entities

Changes in social patterns influence their presentation. The acceleration of social speed inevitably leads to "quantity accumulation," which includes the diversification and popularization of social connections. Stimulated by the fleeting pleasure of fast-paced social interactions and the broad demand for social connections, social methods also become diversified. The fundamental drivers of these changes lie in the mechanisms of the three major entities: market, platform, and users. User demands and technological advancements drive market evolution, enabling platforms to capitalize on controlling user time and emotions. Users, in turn, become passively or actively "addicted" to platform manipulation and self-interest gains, collectively shaping the evolution of social patterns.

3.1. Evolution of the Market: Cost Reduction and User Penetration

Changes in social patterns regarding social speed, social connections, and social methods trace back to the evolution of the market. The reduction in internet costs due to technological advancements and the saturation of mainstream markets have expanded the reach of markets. In the Web 1.0 era before 2004, China's mobile communication technology had a maximum information transfer rate of only 14.4 kbps, supporting only voice calls and SMS functionalities. Many early social media platforms faced bandwidth shortages; for instance, Tianya's server bandwidth from Hainan to Guangdong was a mere 2 Mbps, and even overseas social media like MySpace succumbed to server crashes. With the advent of Web 2.0 in 2008 and the 3G era, information transfer rates reached 2 Mbps, supporting services such as voice and video calls and internet access, though most people still used keypad phones, limiting social media usage to desktop terminals. Around 2011, the proliferation of smartphones with touchscreens marked a shift of social media usage from desktops to mobile devices, fostering diversified social media platforms. The 4G era significantly amplified this trend with information transfer rates reaching 100 Mbps, establishing robust technological foundations for image-based, video-based, and instant messaging social apps. Diversified social media platforms are built upon the interaction of multiple technologies. Web 3.0's integration with cloud computing, blockchain, and artificial intelligence is closely linked, with 5G technology serving as crucial infrastructure due to its high performance, low latency, and high capacity characteristics[14]. As of December 2023, China had cumulatively built and opened 3.377 million 5G base stations, covering all prefecture-level city urban areas and county-level city urban areas. The total number of fixed internet broadband access users from three major basic telecommunications enterprises reached 636 million households, with a net increase of 46.66 million households over the previous year's end; among them, 601 million users have access speeds of 100 Mbps and above, accounting for 94.5% of the total user base [3]. The rapid increase in internet speed will inevitably accelerate social speed

objectively, and the accelerated pace of digital life in the digital age will prompt people to voluntarily increase their social speed.

The mobile wave holds significant milestone significance for the transformation of social patterns. Mobile internet has narrowed the overall digital divide between people. On one hand, mobile phones are easier to operate than computers; on the other hand, the production cost of phones is slightly lower than that of computers, leading to price disparities between the two. In the global growth rates of ICT device users, mobile phones rose from 33.9% in 2005 to 76.2% in 2010, while the growth rates of internet, fixed telephone lines, wireless broadband, and fixed broadband in 2010 did not exceed 30.1%. [15]According to the GSMA Intelligence report "Global Mobile Economy Development 2023," global mobile internet users reached 4.4 billion in 2022[16], generating an additional \$5.2 trillion in economic value for the mobile industry [16]. By 2030, there will be 9 billion smartphones connected, accounting for 92% of total connections [16]. The mobile internet wave shows no sign of receding. Due to advances in communication technology and the proliferation of electronic devices like computers and phones, broadband costs will continue to decline due to economies of scale and boundary benefits. Just as multifunctional smartphones may ultimately eliminate some major standalone electronic consumer technologies [15], multi-functional modern social media will also replace singular forum-type websites. The evolution of social media processes confirms this point.

In the early days of the internet, market expansion focused on first- and second-tier cities. Now, the initial group of highly educated individuals who were early internet adopters is gradually saturated. This trend inevitably leads to an extension towards lower educational levels and older age groups. User penetration and content penetration have become new strategies for social media. Wang Hua, managing partner of Innovation Works, pointed out that the third wave of internet population dividends in China includes mainstream consumer groups in third- and fourth-tier cities, known as "small town middle-aged". [17]Due to lower living pressures in third- and fourth-tier cities compared to first-tier cities, residents have more disposable time, which they spend more on activities such as watching videos and playing games. Data shows that "consumers in China's third-tier and below cities account for more than 70% of the national total, and their GDP accounts for 59% of the national total. At the same time, third-tier and below cities also contribute two-thirds of China's economic growth". [18]Therefore, mass socialization is inevitable. In order to cater to user penetration, internet content penetration is inevitable. "Short and direct" short video social interactions and live streaming social interactions are increasingly favored by users today, with entertainment becoming the main theme of social media content production. Under the dual impetus of user penetration and content penetration, the cost of users becoming producers has decreased. For them, social media is no longer just a place for socializing but also a business origin for how to profit through social interactions.

3.2. Platform Manipulation: Time Delay and Emotional Quantification

The concept and functional design of social media platforms subtly influence users, thereby altering social patterns. Existing research mostly analyzes the control of platforms over users' social and life aspects from an algorithmic perspective. Algorithmic filtering mechanisms coerce individuals into a homogenized network of information, limiting the scope of social connections and the reception of social content. While people overly focus on algorithms, they often overlook the platform's inherent design manipulation. In the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century, humanity created a new development in media called the timeline, which is entirely different from the hierarchical systems of the early 1990s—documents and charts—and the mid-1990s World Wide Web model (represented by search engines). [17]The timeline presents itself in a "flow" form, embedded in platform designs. Whether domestic platforms like TikTok, Little Red Book, MicroBlog, or international ones like Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, all adopt settings where new content appears upon scrolling down. Hu Yong refers to the logic behind this as "time has now become the organizing principle of media" [17].

The user experience on social platforms is structured like a hypnotic rhythm, pulling users into a real-time information flow and constantly urging them to maintain a competitive edge[19]. Content release times are replaced with "xx minutes ago," and video durations are shown with progress bars, creating an illusion of time retention by the platform. This is similar to how casinos control time; they prevent sunlight from entering and forbid the placement of any objects that convey a sense of time: no windows, no clocks, and continuous serving of snacks and materials instead of scheduled meals [19]. Short videos under 60 seconds, posts limited to 140 characters embed short bursts of time into users' trivial daily lives, appearing to utilize time "cherishing every second." However, unwittingly, users fall into the platform's time trap, perpetuating a vicious cycle of "there's still time to keep watching." The aftermath of this time retention can induce anxiety and unease, which translates into restless emotions projected onto social interactions, forming fast-food-style socialization. As new content constantly appears upon scrolling, likes, comments, and likes within comments serve as a platform's reward mechanism, akin to training pets: when pets meet their owner's standards, they receive a reward. In social media, however, the platform is the master. Social media platforms emulate this reward system, immersing users in the pleasure of time retention and fostering dependency. Once users respond positively to this mechanism, they become attracted to other social media platforms that employ similar reward systems. Thus, behind the diversification of social patterns lies nothing more than subtle variations on a theme.

In the time-retention device created by platforms, the quantification of user emotions narrows the range of their social connections. Every swipe, pause, keystroke, and click represents an expression of emotion, yet platforms quantify the emotional value of users through metrics such as likes and pause times. Similarly, Facebook has always sought reactions like "wow" or "like" to replace lengthy emotional expressions in comments. Early social media platforms like Tianya and Mop did not represent liking or approval through likes, nor did they excessively limit the length of posted content. Short statements and direct likes allow platforms to more precisely and quickly analyze users, presenting user profiles and using algorithmic filtering mechanisms to recommend people with commonalities or suggest content liked by similar users, thereby filtering homogeneous social connections for users. Additionally, platforms introduce some "humanizing" features that appear to benefit users but ultimately serve the platform's best interests. Instagram's "archive" feature specifically reserves a corner for old photos that users do not want to publicly display or are no longer popular, discouraging users from deleting these photos and thereby retaining content for the platform. [19]Many social media platforms employ similar strategies with features like "pinning." WeChat Moments' "pinning" allows users to prominently display their most cherished posts without the hassle of deleting or locking every post they wish to keep private. Users often enjoy the convenience of these features but overlook that enjoying them comes at the cost of surrendering personal emotional data to the platform. Platforms could analyze users even without these features, but by achieving the same goals at lower costs and gaining user favor, why wouldn't they? Users initiate chats with strangers on social media, indulging in the joy of common topics and similarities, delighting in their right to choose social connections, yet oblivious that platforms have long made those choices for them. Rather than users coincidentally finding the "friends" they desire, it's more accurate to say that every "friend" they encounter is indistinguishable because it's the platform's choice, not theirs.

3.3. User Addiction: Benefits of Communication and Emotional Thinking

According to Adam Smith's theory of "homo economicus," the shift from singular to diversified social patterns can be traced. Users flock to UGC-type social media platforms due to the benefits gained from communication. In the Web1.0 era, who would have thought that chatting could generate income? Today, platforms like TikTok, Kuaishou, and Little Red Book enable profit from live chat interactions. In the Web2.0 era, users empowered as producers reap double dividends. For instance,

as a live streamer, a user can earn income from live broadcasts—partly from virtual currency recharge income and partly from membership value-added services[20]. With a substantial fan base, they can monetize traffic through partnerships with businesses, selling products, and hosting advertisements, among other opportunities. Even as mere users, participating in various live streams offers emotional release, stress relief, cost-free global travel experiences, and discounts on shopping and consumption[21]. As geopolitical and blood ties weaken and urban prosperity conceals the loneliness of countless strangers, social media interactions may become their sole outlet for emotional expression. Many young people tend to click into live broadcasts hosted by fellow natives, using their shared hometown identity as a catalyst for instant connection. Shared experiences of city life, traditional customs, and familiar accents resonate, fostering rapid engagement and interaction in live streams. By relieving feelings of homesickness and loneliness through live broadcasts, individuals can proactively establish more meaningful connections. With the rise of live tourism and adventure broadcasts, travel bloggers have leveraged new scenarios, demonstrating the value of solo travel and virtual tourism within live streams. Furthermore, female consumer spending has become a driving force behind e-commerce live streaming. Many e-commerce platforms selling clothing and cosmetics capitalize on discounts during live broadcasts to attract female users, increase sales volumes, and enable consumers to engage interactively with hosts to understand product details more comprehensively, thus simulating offline shopping experiences to a greater extent. With a large enough purchasing group, this interaction can lead to collective bargaining, allowing consumers to purchase goods at lower costs.

"Universal personal suffering, as well as a society firmly convinced of its own crisis, are the foundational premises on which social media business models rely." [19] Emotional thinking has gradually become the core of social media and even internet product design. Users are human, and exploring human nature is the source of progress in social media. The manifestation of "greed, anger, and ignorance" in social media design also influences changes in social patterns. Humans are both emotional and rational, but ultimately, they are emotional beings. [22]Perhaps elites may exhibit more rationality, but even the elite cannot escape emotional needs; emotionally, they still dominate, and since most internet users are grassroots, mass social interaction driven by emotional thinking is undoubtedly the trend. Impulsive and lazy users enjoy straightforward "quick feedback," and the pursuit of this pleasure has driven the development of fast-paced social interactions. Greedy and selfish users cannot resist temptation; gimmicks like "earn cash with TikTok (Speed Edition)" and "Snapchat's instant merchant vouchers" [23]are enough to lure users to open a new social app, actively pioneering social interactions in a "willing to be hooked" manner.

Compared to men, emotions are often used to describe women more often. Scientific research and extensive evidence show that women are naturally sensitive and emotionally rich, so their actions rely more on emotions. [24]From a physiological perspective, women's brains, particularly the amygdala and hippocampus responsible for emotions and memory, are more developed than men's. In 2023, women accounted for 46.3% of global social media users [5], slightly lower than men, but women spend more time using social media [5]. This also explains why emotional thinking can influence changes in social patterns; as the number of women online continues to rise, they are more active on social media, and their inherent emotional thinking gradually permeates its use.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of social media brings inevitable changes to social patterns, influenced not only by market forces, platforms, and users—the three main entities—but also by cultural backgrounds, institutional environments, and other factors worth exploring. However, in the digital age, bolstered by artificial intelligence and algorithms, the roles and mechanisms of markets, platforms, and users will become more prominent and crucial. Vigilance against the "alienation" of these three entities is

essential to ensure the prosperity and control of social media development, fostering a positive atmosphere for contemporary digital citizen social interactions.

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